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SUBJECT: TAJIK ELECTIONS: LE GRAND BLEU: KABIRI'S PRAGMATIC
OPPOSITION

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Muhiddin Kabiri, Chair of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), expressed pessimism that the Tajik government would follow through on President Rahmon's repeated promises to run a free and fair February 28 parliamentary election, during a meeting with Ambassador Gross. Kabiri defended the IRPT's classification as an "opposition" party, though he conceded that the party did not directly challenge the President since opposition leaders who did were killed, imprisoned, or forced to leave the country. The IRPT is running an ambitious, but pragmatic election campaign with an eye on expanding its base among the country's dissatisfied youth who yearn for a better life. END SUMMARY

¶2. (SBU) In a meeting with Ambassador Gross at IRPT Headquarters on January 5, Chairman Kabiri predicted that the February 28 elections to the lower house of parliament (Majlis Namoyandagon) "will be the same this year as in 2005," when the government was accused of widespread fraud to win seats for the ruling People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan (PDPT). Kabiri estimated that the IRPT, which has two seats in the current parliament, would win 10 seats in a free and fair poll. "We could get more or less, but only the President could give the answer to that question." Though Rahmon had pledged to be "the guarantor" of fair elections, Kabiri said "we should not be very trusting since there is no criminal penalty for not implementing the president's promise."

¶3. (SBU) Kabiri said the party is "trying to use new methods in its campaign," such as introducing a party color, light blue, to identify supporters. To avoid accusations that the party was trying to stage a color revolution, "we looked through all of the past colored revolutions and made sure to choose an inoffensive color that was never used. There has never been a revolution using light blue." To compensate for the IRPT's limited access to state media, the party is working with the independent press and expanding its use of electronic media. To avoid splitting the vote between opposition candidates, the IRPT would support like-minded, non-IRPT candidates who were better positioned to win a seat. The IRPT would back the Social Democratic Party's candidate running in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast and is negotiating with prominent independent political figures, such as Former Presidential Adviser Ibrahim Osmonov, who are considering running in individual mandate races.

¶4. (SBU) The IRPT has an ambitious long-term strategy beyond the

February polls. Its 2009-2015 development plan aims for an increase in party membership from 33,000 to 150,000 members. To expand IRPT ranks, Kabiri wants to "link the party's future to the younger generation" whose defining life experience was not the civil war. "My university students call on us to take more concrete actions. They want a brighter future and, for them, war is not a problem. The older generation is calling on us to be more cautious." The IRPT has founded student groups in Universities and high schools and is producing electronic informational materials.

¶15. (SBU) Kabiri said the party believes "the international community is not able to make any difference" in its efforts to support free and fair elections. "We used to ask the international community to do this or that. To a degree they did everything that we asked, but this did not make an impact on the election outcome." Despite Kabiri's belief that the Tajik government is "immune to criticism" by the international community (Reftel A), he is "highly appreciative" of USG efforts to raise human rights and religious freedom issues with the Tajik government. He called the government a "totalitarian state which uses all resources for its own benefit."

¶16. (SBU) Kabiri defended his party's reputation as an "opposition party" and said that his party had to make difficult choices to operate in the Tajik political environment, where "oppositionists are murdered, dismissed, or something else happens to them." He conceded that those who say the IRPT is not a real opposition party "are perhaps right to an extent. We do not oppose the person of the President. The main reason for our continued existence is that we do not claim the presidential post." Kabiri justified his party's overtures to the government, such as not running a presidential candidate in

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2006, as the price to be paid for the party to survive. He concluded that few American politicians could survive in the Tajik political environment as vocal political oppositionists. "How many would be willing to be opposition leaders in Central Asia if they knew they could be persecuted or killed?"

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: On the edge of the Tajik political landscape there lies a graveyard of broken political parties and destroyed opposition leaders. By regularly kowtowing to the President, supporting the Roghun fundraising drive, abstaining from the 2006 Presidential election, and removing objectionable candidates from its 2010 party list, the IRPT has avoided this fate. Nevertheless, it has remained an active, organized political force and is poised to expand its influence among the country's increasingly religious and dissatisfied youth. At 42, Kabiri has time to wait for these young Tajiks, unscarred by the civil war, to emerge as a political force for the IRPT to recruit. In the short term, he will be content with a small gain in the IRPT's representation in the Majlisi Namoyandagon and will avoid saying anything that will draw government opposition ahead of the February 28 elections. END COMMENT
GROSS